

Listening to Yeltsin

The rapid decline of Communist hegemony over the Soviet Union, coupled with the rise of Boris Yeltsin, has opened the prospect for a decisive U.S. push for Baltic independence far in advance of Bush administration timetables.

"We are getting close to formal diplomatic relations with the three Baltic states," a State Department policy maker told us. A sign that Secretary of State James Baker is preparing to move was his decision to bring a Russian nationalities expert, Paul Goble, into a State Department advisory role.

Baker's shift coincides with an official statement from Sweden late in August that "without the complete participation of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, it is difficult . . . to envision a future Europe living in peace."

This dramatically altered international mood could not have been possible were it not for the ascent of Yeltsin, who, as president of the Russian Federated Republic, is the leading non-Communist leader in a disintegrating Soviet Union. March 4, when Yeltsin was elected to lead the Soviet Union's largest, most important republic, "was the day the world changed," in the description of a Bush administration insider.

Yeltsin understands that he can lead a liberal Russia but that Mikhail Gorbachev never can lead a liberal Soviet Union, which is a contradiction in terms. The Baltic independence supported by Yeltsin is still opposed by Soviet President Gorbachev. Soviet-Estonian talks broke up last week when Gorbachev's negotiators refused to address the issue of independence for Estonia. Similar talks with Lithuania are at an impasse, and discussions have not even started with Latvia.

Ignored in all the news of the Persian Gulf war threat, Yeltsin now appears ready to sign a "political declaration" with Estonia in a few weeks. That will make Russia the second Soviet republic—Moldavia was the first—to sign what amounts to full recognition of independence for a Baltic state. As Yeltsin's influence escalates, Russia will lead the rest of the Soviet Union into supporting independence for the Baltics.

The surprising push by cautious Sweden came in a formal statement

by Foreign Minister Sten Andersson welcoming "the rebirth of relations" between Sweden and the Baltics. He said Sweden recognizes the three anti-Soviet Baltic parliaments as "legal representatives" of the people and noted that these three assemblies all have "clearly affirmed" the demand for "self-determination" as independent states. That moves close to outright recognition.

Czechoslovakia's President Vaclav Havel has told Western diplomats privately that his newly free country will recognize Baltic sovereignty immediately once another government—probably Sweden's—has first done so. Lech Walesa predicts publicly that Poland will do the same thing.

That could open the floodgate to correcting one of contemporary history's most pernicious outrages. In 1939 the three Baltic states whose culture, religion and politics had all been tied fast to the West were bound over to the Kremlin as Stalin and Hitler carved up Central Europe in the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact to begin World War II.

President Bush and Secretary Baker refused for months to even mention the word "independence" when speaking about the Baltics, apparently out of fear of affronting Gorbachev.

Two months ago, Baker saw the light. In a statement at Ireland's Shannon Airport, he switched U.S. policy on handling Yeltsin, until then downgraded and insulted inside the White House. It was time, he said, to "reach out" beyond Gorbachev in dealing with Moscow. In other words, listen to Boris. The process progressed last week when White House chief of staff John Sununu returned to Washington with glowing reports about Yeltsin after a long meeting in Moscow.

As part of that reaching out, Baker has plucked Goble from Radio Free Europe headquarters in Munich and brought him to Washington for advice on the burning problems of the Baltic and other nationalities. Characteristically precise, the secretary of state has positioned himself to support outright independence. He knows the time is long past to worry about Gorbachev's misgivings.